

## TWO-CHARACTER PLAYS AS «TEATRO INTIMO»: EXAMPLES FROM DIAZ, JUNYENT AND SALOM

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In a recent *Estreno* article, Anita Johnson outlines changes on the Spanish stage, 1985-1990. She affirms that, with the exception of government-subsidized theaters, economic factors have led to productions with reduced casts and an increasing number of dramatic monologues and two-actor plays (Johnson 10). The two-actor play is neither a new invention nor is its popularity limited to Spain; it has, however, become a marked component of the contemporary Spanish theater scene. Critic Lorenzo López Sancho, in reviewing Paloma Pedrero's 1985 *La llamada de Lauren*, declares that «las comedias de dos personajes están de moda» and links the beginning of the current vogue to *Buenas noches, madre*<sup>1</sup>.

Miguel Sierra's version of Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* opened in September 1984 at the Reina Victoria and was one of that year's three longest-running plays (Alvaro 1984:295). In a three-way tie, its stars, Mari Carrillo and Concha Velasco, shared the annual Espectador y la Crítica Prize for best actress, and Angel García Moreno was awarded the director's prize, in part for this production.

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<sup>1</sup> López Sancho also mentions three other plays that reached the Madrid stage in 1985: *Hay que deshacer la casa* and the Spanish versions of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* and *True West*. Although their focus is on the two-character relationship, the Shepard plays, however, both introduce a third character.

Sebastián Junyent's search for a suitable vehicle for two actresses antedates the triumph in Madrid of Norman's hyperrealistic text. Because Junyent had in mind an ideal cast, Amparo Rivelles and Lola Cardona, but no play, he wrote his own first script (Personal interview). *Hay que deshacer la casa*, winner of the Lope de Vega Prize for 1983, premiered in December 1984, in Valencia, and reached Madrid in January 1985, while *Buenas noches, madre* was still running. Junyent's work ran for more than 500 performances at the Teatro de la Comedia, toured the provinces and abroad—including Miami, Florida—and returned to Madrid in 1986 at the Teatro Fígaro (Alvaro 1985:20, 297). Repeating the situation of *Buenas noches, madre*, the two stars shared the Espectador y la Crítica Prize for best actress. The Norman and Junyent texts established clearly that two-character plays could showcase acting talent, have box-office appeal, and receive critical acclaim.

A play with two actors and one set obviously costs less than a big cast production and travels with relative ease. If the actors are popular and the text interesting, it can stay on the road for years. Such is the case with Jaime Salom's *Una hora sin televisión*, which has been performed more than 2000 times since Manuel Tejada and Pilar Velázquez opened in Alicante in February 1987 and at Madrid's Teatro Príncipe the following June.

The three plays I've chosen as illustrations of the two-character play—Junyent's *Hay que deshacer la casa*, Salom's *Una hora sin televisión*, and Jorge Díaz's *Ayer, sin ir más lejos* (winner of the Tirso de Molina Prize for 1985 under the name *Las cicatrices de la memoria*)—fall into the category of theater that Salom calls «teatro íntimo» or «intimista» (Personal interview). The possibilities for two-actor plays are, however, quite varied. These include texts in which two actors double in multiple roles or act out a series of skits (*Quintuples*, a recent work by the Puerto Rican Luis Rafael Sánchez comes to mind); other highly metatheatrical texts, like José Sanchís Sinisterra's 1988 *¡Ay, Carmela!*, that present a series of situations and performances-within-the-text in episodic fashion; absurdist/ Artaudian *tours de force* of role-playing-within-the-role, like Díaz's own *El cepillo de dientes* (1961) or Fernando Arrabal's masterpiece, *El arquitecto y el emperador de Asiria* (1967); more realistic cat and mouse games, such as Fermín Cabal's *Vade retro!* (1982); far more static—and poetic—duets, epi-

tomized by the French Marguérite Duras's *Savannah Bay* (1983); and quasi-documentary interviews, like the stage version of Miguel Delibes's novel *Las guerras de nuestros antepasados* (1990).

The *teatro íntimo* differs from these other possibilities by presenting realistically a moment of crisis or consciousness-raising in the lives of two people who have been very close: mother and daughter, sisters, husband and wife, best friends. Typically the pair has become estranged, and there is a past or projected separation that provokes reminiscences, confessions, and perhaps recriminations<sup>2</sup>.

Salom, who was written only one two-actor play himself, suggests that this kind of theater is influenced by the intimacy of television and that the audience is placed in the position of overhearing an intense, personal conversation (Personal interview). Díaz, author of eight two-actor plays of varying types, agrees with Salom's label but points out that Madrid lacks playhouses, preferably under 200 seats, that are appropriately designed for «intimate» theater (Personal interview). I would observe, nevertheless, that the 1000-seat Reina Victoria and 800-seat Comedia theaters—Where *Buenas noches, madre* and *Hay que deshacer la casa* were long-running hits—are among Madrid's largest playhouses and have traditional proscenium stages.

Díaz's *Ayer, sin ir más lejos* opened in the Bellas Artes in February 1987. Directed by María Ruiz and starring Mercedes Sampietro and Emilio Gutiérrez Caba, it was originally projected to run the rest of the season (Oliva 14) but closed after only 48 performances. Although it did not achieve the success of the other two plays under discussion, it was subsequently taken on a short tour and has been aired on Spanish television and radio (Díaz personal interview). Of the three texts, it is structurally the most ambitious: the action flows from present to past and the themes are both personal and political.

As the play begins, the marriage of Teo and Ana is breaking up, and they are dividing their belongings. In expressionistic fashion, episodes from their life together are evoked as flashbacks. The marxist cause that united them in Franco Spain no longer holds them together; in Orteguian terms, they are themselves and

<sup>2</sup> Pedrero's *La llamada de Lauren*, as well as her 1988 *El color de agosto*, closely fits the above definition of «teatro íntimo».

their —changing— circumstances. Their flow of reminiscences and recriminations is broken when they realize that their teenage son has run away. In the second act, several days later, the anxious parents remain united in their concern; at the end, the boy decides to come home, and with his knock at the door, the marriage appears to be saved, at least temporarily.

Díaz is well known among theater specialists for working and reworking his plays —and for kindly sharing this information if asked. The «preámbulo» to *Ayer, sin ir más lejos* was the one-act *Los jardines sumergidos*, a winner in a 1989 contest but written some years earlier (Personal interview). The shorter play has a larger cast and more fluidity of movement; it focuses on the disappearance of a teenage girl who drifts into the drug culture. In his reworking, Díaz eliminated superfluous characters, shifted the emphasis from the missing child and drugs to the parents and their relationship, and added the political themes.

Those who have come to «deshacer la casa» in Junyent's play are two sisters, now in their forties, who have been separated since Ana, the younger one, ran away at seventeen with a married man. Her act was in rebellion against her father's unloving rigidity. There are no flashbacks here, as in the Díaz play, but Ana and Laura —helped along by generous quantities of alcohol— comically imitate the voices from their mutual past and provide a satirical image of the conservative ideology that underscored their growing up female in Francoist Spain. Although this is the intimate drama of two sisters —the «good» one who has been dutiful daughter, wife, and mother, and the «bad» one who opted for freedom and has only recently married the last in her series of lovers— in fact the reunion makes them both painfully aware of their loneliness, their fears, and the extent to which they, like their mother before them, have been manipulated by the men in their lives. At Ana's insistence, the sisters attack their father's portrait and tear it up. They defy Laura's husband's authoritarian idea of how their inheritance should be divided by rolling dice for lots of their mother's jewelry. But in the end, it appears they will nevertheless remain hostages to their past and their husbands' control.

Salom's play emphasizes male-female inequality in the traditional Spanish marriage by creating a stereotypically *machista* husband. Eduardo belittles his pianist wife's musical talents, makes fun of the men who play in her orchestra, tends to ignore her at

home to watch televised sports and porno movies, and has affairs with as many women as possible, particularly the young models at his advertising agency. When Patricia announces on their eighteenth wedding anniversary that she plans to *deshacer la casa* —or at least abandon it, probably taking their sons with her, to join her new love in Boston— Eduardo goes through various predictable stages: scornful disbelief, sentimental cajoling, physical aggression. Like Ibsen's Nora, Patricia slams the door —but then returns to admit that her ideal American admirer, an influential man in the world of classical music, was a fiction and that she cannot break up her home for the local musician that Eduardo had previously ridiculed. However, the ending of this play, too, is open: Patricia receives a call from Boston, and the curtain falls.

The texts discussed here have three factors in common: a revisionist perspective on the status of women in Spanish society, references to popular culture and/or music, and a concentration on dialogue over action.

All three plays present non-traditional perspectives on the situation of Spanish women. Díaz's Ana has been a radical since her university days and continues to be politically active. Junyent's characters systematically reveal how destructive patriarchal ideology was to their own self-realization or happiness. Ana was discouraged from studying to be a doctor, and Laura has found her acceptable role as wife and mother to be an empty one. Salom's Patricia was encouraged to choose marriage over her dream of being a pianist but has defiantly returned to her musical career; in her hour without television interference, she forces Eduardo to confront his *machista* double standard.

In their evocation of the past, all three plays make extensive use of popular culture and/or music. Díaz prefaces his work with Bob Dylan's lyrics, «Los tiempos están cambiando», and specifies background music by the Beatles and Joan Baez. Junyent's sisters repeatedly recall their favorite movies and their girlhood dreams based on Hollywood images; they are to give their rendition of «Singin' in the Rain» and of a song taught them by the nuns at school. Salom's stage set has two focal points, with accompanying sound effects: Eduardo's television and Patricia's grand piano. The musical quality of a two-actor duet is additionally underscored by Díaz's original subtitle: «Finale: Allegro ma non troppo». Si-

milarly, Salom divides *Una hora sin televisión* into four movements: «moderato», «andante», «adagio», and «magestuoso».

In the realistic two-actor play, dialogue is foreground. Because these texts deal specifically with Spain in the 1980s and with memories of a not-so-distant past, it is important that the dialogue have a ring of colloquial authenticity. Part of the negative response to the Díaz play hinges on just that issue (*El Público* 49-50); the Chilean-born playwright perhaps did not capture the true voices of his characters. On the other hand, positive reaction to the Junyent and Salom plays highlights how real these characters are and how much their language and experiences remind spectators of people they know.

This final characteristic brings us back to Salom's explanation for the appeal of this kind of «teatro íntimo»: at its best, it's like eavesdropping on an intense, personal conversation. Two-actor plays may be chosen for production because they are economical, but they fill theaters because spectators enjoy their glimpse of the human drama of everyday life.

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